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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE APOSTOLIC AGE

IV. Doctrine in the Apostolic Age

Primitive Christian doctrine is seen most fully and most ardently in the letters of Paul. The Apostle to the Gentiles had a keen intellectual interest in the Gospel of Jesus, in its doctrinal aspects, in its relation to Judaism, and in its relation to the religious ideas of the hellenistic world. This was not his primary interest, however, because Paul was first of all a missionary, incessantly and absorbingly active in the evangelization of non-Christians and the upbuilding of Christians in practical faith and life. His Christian theology consisted chiefly of Jewish ideas interpreted with reference to Jesus as Messiah, with some elements from hellenistic theology. But he gave these ideas a construction, a color, a vitality, and a presentation such as have earned for him the title of "the Founder of Christian Theology."

This study of Doctrine in the Apostolic Age is conducted by PROFESSOR GEORGE HOLLEY GILBERT. Questions concerning it may be addressed to the AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE.

It may indeed appear to be a singular proceeding to assign Weinel's *Paul the Man and His Work* as the one book to be studied for the topic of this month—doctrine in the Apostolic age. The reason for it is the desire to concentrate attention on that feature of doctrine in the Apostolic age which is at once the most difficult and the most important. For this end we might very properly have selected the little book of J. Weiss, *Paul and Jesus*, or the book of Arnold Meyer, *Jesus or Paul*, or Wrede's *Paul*, all of which might profitably be read together with that which is assigned. Each of these books, we say, leads us into that question which is of central importance in any study of doctrine in the Apostolic age, viz., the relation of Paul to Jesus, or, in other words, the Christianity of Paul. They are conspicuous

in the group of writings which deal with this far-reaching question. But Weinel's book is perhaps preferable for the present course because of its more detailed discussion of the personality and the material equipment of the apostle.

Of the seven sections into which Weinel's book is divided we shall pass all but one in rapid survey.

It is of great importance to see that much of that which is commonly known as "Paulinism" is simply contemporary Jewish theology. Such is the case with his conception of the universe as a three-storied building and his conception of good and bad spirits whose power is everywhere manifested. This chapter of rabbinic teaching Paul, it is said, appropriated very fully, and the nature of his piety was powerfully influenced thereby.

Such also was the doctrine that the temporal course of the world is divided into two aeons by a great catastrophe, and the doctrine that man, created innocent, fell by transgression and that through his fall death came into the world. Contemporary eschatology too, with only slight modifications, is found in the writings of Paul. Even the coming of Christ, the great event of the future, is not wholly inherited from the Christian community and the tradition of the teaching of Jesus. The fact that Paul speaks of the "coming" of Christ, as though he had not already come, is taken as evidence that Paul, while still a Jew, had believed in the heavenly existence of the Messiah and in his coming as the signal event of future history. This mode of speech would then show that, for Paul, the earthly life of Jesus was merely an unessential incident in his career, or at least a fact of subordinate value. This heavenly Messiah in whom the Jew Paul had believed was thought of as a being "in the form of God," a being through whom the world had been created. He had appeared under various forms to the fathers, e.g., as a "rock" to Moses.

It may be noted here that Meyer, while admitting that "official Judaism" was contented with the belief that the coming Son of David had only an ideal pre-existence, believes at the same time that Paul, influenced by unknown apocryphal writings of a mystical tendency and perhaps also by current tales of sons of the Gods who had descended to earth as deliverers, e.g., Marduk, Hermes (Thot), and Adonis, had come to believe that the heavenly Messiah was the Son of God, the commissioned

Creator of the world, the second Adam, the conqueror of God's enemies, the hero of the underworld who should die and rise again. In like manner J. Weiss thinks that Paul as a Jew believed that the heavenly Messiah was the Son of God, that he existed in a divine form, and that he was at length to reveal himself.

The student will of course recognize at once the extreme importance of this subject of pre-Christian Christology, and the necessity of determining most carefully its character and extent. It can hardly be said that the discussion has yet reached definite conclusions.

Once more—and this point also is of great significance—Paul's conception and interpretation of Scripture was simply that of the rabbinical school. His use of prophecy, typology, and allegory was that of contemporary Judaism.

At the time of his conversion Paul came to believe that the risen Christ lived in him in a supernatural manner—a belief that vitally affected his thought of his own teaching, for it made it easy and natural for him to regard this teaching as a "revelation." It is to be noticed in this connection that the character of Paul's conversion, which was effected by a vision of the *risen* Christ, led him to conceive of faith not simply as an attitude of trust but also as the acceptance of "facts" of history.

Weinel holds that Paul's sudden change from a persecutor of the church to a believer led him to emphasize the Jewish tenet that God shows mercy on whom he will and hardens whom he will. The apostle is not able to bring this doctrine into accord with divine justice, not *really*, that is, though he may have

rested satisfied in the Scripture proof which he presented in the Epistle to the Romans.

It is thought that Paul harmonized the doctrine with that of human responsibility by way of the heart. His love for his people and his confidence in their election led him to the conviction that their present hardening was only a means to an end, and that end their ultimate salvation. Thus, it is said, his heart won a "complete victory." But it is not easy to see how he won a *complete* victory. For though the people of some *future* generation are to be saved, those who are now hardened and who die in their hardness are not included in that future mercy of God, thus the completeness of the victory seems to be seriously clouded.

The "first breach" that was made in the walls of the new faith was made, according to Weinell, in that Paul combined two forms of religion, an internal and an external, a religion of faith pure and simple and a religion of sacraments. Weinell's view at this point is not quite consistent with his admission that we do not know *who* transformed baptism and the eucharist into sacraments, but they were regarded as such previous to the writing of Paul's letters. However, though the breach may have been made by others than Paul, he was certainly the one who made it widely known. The important question is this, whether a sacrament as conceived by Paul *did* really constitute a "breach" in the walls of the new faith.

Again, the walls of the new faith were broken through when Paul, though he had declared the Christian free from the law and so free from sacrifices, fell out

with his own principle, and conceived of Christ as the Lamb sacrificed for all believers. By this word he became the father of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass.

To Weinell's view of Paul the teacher we must give somewhat more attention than to other parts of the book. The greatness of Paul as a theologian is found in the fact that the center of his theology was his personal religious experience. Wrede expresses the same thought in these words: "The religion of the apostle is theological through and through; his theology is his religion." There is here doubtless an important truth, though one may hesitate to accept the statement that *all* of Paul's doctrinal views were of such a sort that they could be put to the test of actual experience.

The "core and center" of Paul's theology is said to have been the doctrine of justification by faith. Weinell regards this as distinctively personal to the apostle, not a part of the common body of Christian or Jewish thought. Meyer, on the other hand, reminds us that the apostle expounds this doctrine only in a single passage of the Epistle to the Romans where he is contending against the legalistic conception of religion. The conception of God as judge who reckons righteousness apart from works is held by him to be Jewish.

Weinell would of course admit that the idea of justification or acquittal as a way of salvation or as a necessary step therein was Jewish. What is new is that acquittal now rests on *faith*. The Jewish conception of righteousness is changed into its opposite. A man is acquitted not because he is righteous

but because he believes, and his acquittal is wholly a free gift. The object of this saving faith is the resurrection of Jesus and his propitiatory death in man's behalf.

The promise of blessedness to the children of Abraham is as important in Paul's thought as is justification by faith. Believers are proved to be the true "children" of Abraham by the agreement of their experience with his. This line of thought is doubtless carried too far when the raising of Isaac is treated as parallel to the resurrection of Jesus, and Abraham's faith in the promise concerning Isaac parallel to the believer's faith in the resurrection of Jesus.

Discussing the content of the believer's faith Weinel holds that the term propitiation (*ἱλαστήριον*), though by itself it might denote a propitiatory *memorial*, was used by Paul with the thought of sacrifice. This meaning is most harmonious with the thought of the ancient world. It is suggested indeed by the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, though Weinel is careful to say that here the thought of expiation is thrust entirely into the background. More distinctive of Paul's thought is the idea that the death of Jesus was demanded by the law. The curse of the law is death. Jesus was under the law, therefore under the curse. And yet further, he was under the law in a special sense in that he died on the cross, for this death shows, according to the law, that one is "accursed." But since Jesus was innocent, the curse spent its force on him, became henceforth inoperative, and thus God's mercy could have free play. This, says Weinel, is the clearest

theory that Paul advances of the death of Jesus. Another view is found which may be stated as follows: Jesus died that we might die *in him*, and dying be acquitted of sin.

Such theories of the death of Jesus Weinel rejects because they seem to him to contain an un-Christian conception of God and his relation to man. God "does not wish to be just, but he is love." "He who cannot be moved to repentance by God's goodness and a man's surrender unto death, even the death upon the cross, will listen in vain to systems of sacrifice and theories of propitiation which are intended to establish God's righteousness palpably."

The most important fact for the doctrine of the Apostolic age is Paul's attitude toward the historical Jesus. We have already seen what Weinel considered to have been Paul's pre-Christian conception of the heavenly Messiah. In the hour of his conversion he came to identify the heavenly Messiah with Jesus of Nazareth, and in consequence of this identification the simple features of the Carpenter were in danger of being lost beneath the heavenly aureole.

It is a little difficult to ascertain just what Weinel thinks on this point. He says at one time that "Jesus can scarcely be said to have existed for him [Paul] as a human being. What interests him in Jesus is simply his present life in the believer and his death." Some passages which have been supposed to refer to the historical Jesus, like the references to his obedience and gentleness, are considered to have the heavenly Christ in view. But, on the other hand, Weinel supposes that "the total impression of the person of Jesus which

we derive from the Synoptists was already a living reality for Paul and determined his action." But if that was the case, if the impression of the person of Jesus which we derive from the Synoptists was a reality for Paul and determined his action, how can we go quite so far as to say that Jesus scarcely existed for him as a human being, and that Paul was interested only in his death and in his present life in the believer? The two views seem to be stated somewhat more absolutely than is warrantable, or at least one of them. For my part, I should modify the second view not a little. It does not seem to me that the facts warrant the statement that Paul had the same impression of the person of Jesus that we derive from the Synoptists.

The heavenly being who was incarnated in Jesus was, according to Paul, below God. His nature was divine, but he was not God. He was God's son, i.e., he stood in a special relation to him, either a special relation of love or the special relation of Messiah or in both relations. But though Paul always distinguishes Christ from God, he does not always distinguish him from the Spirit. But that these three beings formed one Almighty God, as in the later creeds of the church, there is in Paul, according to Weinel, no trace.

As to Paul's ethical system it leaves us, says Weinel, with very mixed feelings. As compared with the ethics of Jesus, Paul's teaching makes a compromise here and there with the old ethics of the world. Thus one is to keep peace *as much as in one lies*, and one is to do good to all men, but *especially* to them who are of the household of

faith. This is a "toning down" of Jesus' conception of brotherhood.

Paul's ethical teaching covers only a part of human activity. In what he says of particular vices it is thought that he may have copied current lists, but was more independent when speaking of the virtues. But the limited field of Paul's ethics is simply an evidence that he wrote as a missionary with certain specific conditions in view, and not as a moral philosopher.

The foundation of ethics in Paul is religious, and the ethical demand is accompanied with the doctrine of divine rewards and punishments. Yet he is not confined to this sphere of thought. His mysticism led to another and more profound thought concerning the ground of morality. This was the thought that the life of one in whom Christ dwells is from inner necessity a holy life. Here he rises above all merely legal religion to a high spiritual plane. Thus Paul wavered, as the church of subsequent times has done, between the doctrine that morality is the necessary outflow of religion and the doctrine that it is cultivated by the presentation of rewards and punishments.

Regarding the mystical element in Paul's ethics, attention may here be called to the view of J. Weiss. He interprets the words of I Cor. 2:16 not as meaning we "think" as Christ thinks, but Christ thinks in us. Accordingly Paul's "ways which are in Christ" are the very ways which Jesus would follow and teach. But though this formula is mystical (to be in Christ), the psychological process is not. What Paul meant was that he followed the spirit of the teaching of Jesus. Weiss

sees a fundamental agreement between the ethics of Paul and of Jesus in the doctrine of love, and, what is equally significant, he sees in the remarkable manner in which Paul showed a spirit of love an impulse from the person of Jesus. But Weiss also points out the departure of Paul's ethics from the teaching of Jesus. Like Weinel he sees here and there a compromise between the ideal and the real, as in his treatment of the "weak." Paul, again, is less liberal than Jesus in the matter of associating with sinners. The idea of the figurative commandment to heap coals of fire on an enemy's head is not in full accord with the beatitude for the meek. The difference between Paul and Jesus is further seen in the fact that the teaching of the former contains a considerable Greek element.

Meyer agrees with Weiss in regard to the profound influence of the love of Jesus upon Paul and his teaching. "It

was really this love that he saw before Damascus. . . . It was this mighty power of love which delivered him from his bondage to the law."

As suggested at the outset of the article, its aim has been to direct attention to one highly important element in the belief of the Apostolic age, viz., Paul's attitude toward Jesus. How seriously this question is being discussed in Germany may be inferred, to a degree, from the books to which reference has been made. Its immensely practical character for the preacher of the gospel is of course perfectly obvious. Every minister ought to be thoroughly acquainted with this discussion. The outcome of it, one can hardly doubt, will affect the teaching of the New Testament in a far more fundamental way than the teaching of the Old Testament has been affected by the critical investigation of the Pentateuch.